

Sharing the Power and the Glory

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"We should be concerned with improving the economic and social status of Blacks *and* women. We cannot be assured that a single focus . . . will meet our full needs."



"I am eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all . . .

I am glad to see that men are getting their rights, but I want women to get theirs, and while the water is stirring I will step into the pool."

SOJOURNER TRUTH, 1853

Sojourner Truth, a Black woman, understood the need to be an activist in the struggle for women's rights as well as for Black rights. She recognized that when people in her time spoke about women, they did not necessarily mean Black women.

Yet she, like some Black women today, understood that being Black and female was double discrimination, and that the freedom of *all* women was the freedom of *all* men, that there could be no free men unless all women were free.

Today's Black women still suffer double discrimination and whether race or sex discrimination is greater is open to debate. Recent efforts to improve the status of minority workers have meant better jobs and higher earnings for *some* Black women, but Black women as a group continue to earn less than any other segment of the society. According to the 1970 statistics of the Department of Labor, the median full-time yearly wage for White male workers was \$9,104; for minority males, \$6,598; for White women, \$5,490; and for minority women, \$4,674.

The work profile for Black women shows that we are more likely to be in the labor force than other women, to have less formal education, a higher rate of unemployment and lower income than other White counterparts, and more likely to be in low-paying occupations.

Therefore, as Black women, we

should be concerned with improving the economic and social status of Blacks *and* women. We cannot be assured that a single focus—on either Black progress or women's progress—will meet our full needs. As working mothers (30 percent compared to 10 percent for White women) we need adequate child care facilities. We need equal employment opportunities—job training and job promotion as well as entry into non-traditional women's jobs. We need educational opportunities with special concerns for re-entry women, working women and poor women. We need the right to control our reproductive lives, adequate housing, and social justice.

These are some of the same concerns of the women's movement, a major force in the world today, and activist/feminist groups—the National Organization for Women (NOW), National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), League of Women Voters (LWV)—are changing legislation, institutions and the "powers that be" to bring about changes, presumed to be beneficial to all women.

Can we sit back and not be involved in these major societal changes? How do others know what our unique perspectives are if we are not there to articulate, discuss, support and, more importantly, lobby for them. Could we not gain more, faster, by working in coalition on issues with those who share our concerns?

The women's movement is stirring the water and changes are being made and will continue to be made. Even if we disagree on some emphases of the movement, we should be there to give our input. The necessity to assure that the Black perspective is heard and included should outweigh the "I want no part of" arguments.

And so, like Sojourner Truth, while the water is stirring let us step into the pool. Let us work with the women's movement, as well as with our own vital Black groups.

Black women's activist groups are springing up around the country (San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit and tiny Davis, California—to name a few cities with functioning organizations), and their growth indicates the emerging awareness of Black women, and now is the time to step into the pool. Black women are coming together to work out problems—economic, political, educational, social—from a Black female perspective; to encourage and support each other; and to organize to force the changes which are necessary to the survival of the Black community, as well as the Black woman.

Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA) in the San Francisco Bay area is one of these groups. On January 10, 1973 15 women answered the first call to assemble. Since that time membership has grown to over 400.

BWOA came into being as a vehicle for encouraging Black women in the San Francisco Bay area to become involved in eliminating both the racism and sexism which affects every facet of life and to assist each other in realizing the Black woman's fullest potential. The group wanted to go beyond programs focussed simply on electing individuals to office and decided to emphasize the need to educate, develop and moti-

vate Black women to function at all levels in the community—identifying issues, devising strategies for solving problems, finding and encouraging women to run for office and seek appointments to boards and commissions.

In general, the group is working to politicize Black women—in the fullest sense—to assure that the Black community, functioning with the skills of Black men and Black women honed to the sharpest point, survives and progresses.

The BWOA statement of purpose highlights this commitment:

We are Black, and therefore imbedded in our consciousness is commitment to the struggle of Black people for identity and involvement in decisions that affect our lives and the lives of other generations of Black people who will follow us.

We are Women, and therefore aware of the sometimes blatant waste of the talents and energies of Black women because this society has decreed a place for us.

We are Organized, because we recognize that only together, only by pooling our talents and resources, can we make major change in the institutions which have limited our opportunities and stifled our growth as human beings.

We are For Action, because we believe that the time for rhetoric is past; that the skills of Black women can best be put to use in a variety of ways to change the society; that, in the political world in which we live, involvement of Black women must go beyond the traditional fund-raising and into the full gamut of activities that make up the political process which affects our lives in so many ways.

BWOA is structured to encourage its members to share leadership, work and community involvements. There are no "traditional" officers; with the single exception of treasurer. BWOA operates with coordinators—two or three—who volunteer and serve for a three-month period. During their "quarter" of leadership, the coordinators convene, organize and moderate the monthly meetings; respond to inquiries about the organization; and function as spokespersons for the group in contacts with legislative bodies and the

media. The committees are task oriented and composed of volunteers who then select their own coordinators. The arrangement makes clear that a key to leadership (and "glory") is the willingness to work.

In keeping with BWOA's philosophy of getting more Black women involved, BWOA adopted membership qualifications that would allow participation by all those committed to the organization's goals—women with little or no money as well as those with little or no time, can and do belong to BWOA. A member is one who pays dues or attends monthly meetings or participates on a committee; many members do all three. The membership dues range from \$5.00 to \$25.00 per year on an installment basis, if necessary. Members pay whatever they can whenever they can; many pay the full \$25.00.

Members can select from a wide range of committees designed to speak to individual interests and skills—Cable TV, membership, public information, legislative and political action, media, feminist, health, education, small business and employment. In addition, there are "special project" committees which are focussing on current action programs. Among the actions:

- An informational picketing of markets urging a selective buying campaign on General Mills products to highlight the company's poor utilization of women and minorities.
- Picketing of the San Francisco Symphony and the local musicians' union to protest the failure of the orchestra to grant tenure to outstanding, nationally known tympanist Elayne Jones.
- A birthday celebration at the site of the eucalyptus trees planted by Mary Ellen "Mammy" Pleasant—a Black woman who played a significant role in early California history by encouraging the employment of Blacks in San Francisco, financing the Underground Railroad and underwriting the cost of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry.

← leadership

qualifications of membership

how many?

committee duties

who approved special projects?

org. structure

definition

societal trans. individ. emp.

“... to assure that the Black community, functioning with the skills of Black men and women honed to the sharpest point, survives and progresses.”

mem. comp.
BWOA's membership is varied—the young (19) and the not so young (65-plus); the affluent (\$50,000 per annum) and those on welfare; the militant and the conservative; the feminist and the non-feminist; women of all colors and all manner of dress; married and single; parents and childless—a bouquet of Black women.

Among their occupations: social worker, hotel maid, artist, accountant, secretary, program director, nurse, city planner, journalist, fundraiser, computer analyst, attorney, abortion counselor, consultant, reporter, apprenticeship recruiter, personnel technician, actress, librarian, and entrepreneur. Some are unemployed; some are students. All are workers for BWOA and their variety gives the organization a unique talent bank on which to draw.

activities
BWOA activities include giving testimony to legislative bodies and commissions on a wide range of subjects important to the Black community; picketing and demonstrating; supporting Black women in business (such as arranging media coverage for an Oakland-based sausage company owned and operated by Madeline Bunch, a Black woman—the coverage resulted in Safeway's decision to include her product in area stores); supporting Black arts and artists (such as sponsoring an opening night theatre party for “Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope”); filing complaints and suits against California employers; organizing a talent bank of Black women whose skills and abilities can be put to use on boards and commissions, in political office, in community training, monitoring the activities of political structures which have important decision-making power (e.g., city councils, boards of supervisors, boards of education, California commissions).

BWOA has testified before the San Francisco Committee on the Status

of Women, San Francisco Cable TV Committee, San Francisco Board of Supervisors Housing and Development Committee, California Fair Employment Practice Commission and the California State Legislature's Joint Committee on Legal Equality.

It has sent letters to hundreds of individuals and organizations supporting Black community issues, and BWOA members were quick to protest the Zebra “stop and search” program endorsed by San Francisco Mayor Joseph L. Alioto, and the unwarranted firing of an outspoken Black teacher, Yvonne Golden, against whom charges were filed by a member of the board of education and later dismissed by the courts.

These activities have only been possible because they have been shared activities. No “stars” speak in behalf of BWOA; whoever can spare the time writes the letter, drafts the testimony or volunteers to deliver the comments for the group; those who share the work, share the power and the glory.

BWOA is a part of the only statewide coalition of minorities and women in California—and perhaps in the nation—a coalition, concerned with affirmative action and equal employment opportunities. The group, with major assistance from a public-interest law firm, Public Advocates, has filed complaints and suits, negotiated agreements and obtained consent decrees from major California companies. In addition to BWOA the coalition includes: The National Organization for Women (now), National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (NAACP), the American G.I. Forum, the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA), the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Spanish Speaking Unity Council and other organizations concerned with Native American and Asians needs.

coalition work
One of the results of BWOA's public involvement has been a steady stream of new members—coming into the organization because they see it as an action-oriented group prepared to work to meet the specific needs of Black women. As the organization has grown, the need for communication has expanded and BWOA now has a lively newsletter, “WHAT IT IS” which highlights news of interest to the group. Initially started as a “jobs announcement” vehicle—spreading information about employment opportunities in the San Francisco area—the newsletter has broadened its focus to include a variety of items of interest. Job information is now circulated by the employment opportunity committee, and “clinics” on financial management and resume preparation have been held to prepare members for improved employment prospects.

who prepared newsletter?
A major project was a one-day conference, “Black Women's Strategies for Independence—Action '74,” held in December, 1973 which aimed at determining the organization's priorities for 1974 and involving Black women in the political process. Space was limited to 300 registrants who were honored on a “first-come” basis. A \$3.00 registration fee included lunch and all conference materials. Participants came from all parts of the state and from as far away as Washington and New York. Ten workshops were planned and coordinated by experts in their fields. The imaginative workshop titles raised the interest of the area's Black women:

• Black Woman Power (Employ-

“No ‘stars’ speak . . . whoever can spare the time writes the letter . . . volunteers to deliver the comments. . . .”

Power and Glory . . .

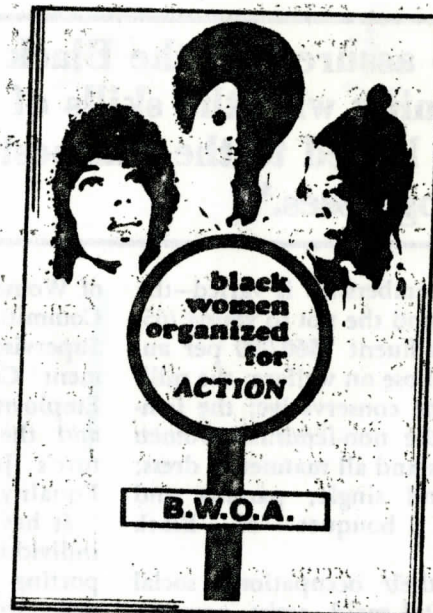
- ment Opportunities)
- Discriminatory Effects of the Hippocratic Oath (Health Status)
- Let George Stuff Envelopes (Political Strategy)
- Black Women and the Ivy-Covered Towers (Educational Opportunities)
- Must Sapphire Burn Her Bra (Black Women's Rights)
- \$5.00 Down . . . (Consumerism)
- Justice Is in Drag (Women Prisoners)
- Triple Jeopardy: Black, Female and Breadwinner (Women Heads of Households)
- Horatio Alger Will Not Admit Black Women (Economic Opportunities)
- Mirror, Mirror . . . (Media and the Arts)

Many BWOA members acted as panelists, and the conference produced many new members for BWOA.

Out of Black Women Organized for Action have come ripples that have spread into waves. Black women, learning the skills of cooperation in BWOA, have formed poetry groups, joined in statewide coalitions for political activity in behalf of women, addressed discrimination in employment in police departments, sensitized police to the treatment of women in rape cases and formed a child-care services group, Creative Capers, and a publishing company, Sapphire Publishing Company. *who?*

From community activity into economic activity; from 15 members to 400 in less than two years. Black women, working together, have stepped into the pool and are swimming steadily into the stream of American life — determined to change it significantly to encompass the needs and aspirations of Black people.

All three authors are: Co-Coordinator of the National Task Force on Minority Women and Women's Rights of the National Organization for Women, founders of Black Women Organized for Action, and partners in the Sapphire Publishing Company.



SISTERS WORKING TOGETHER

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